The far right

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Revealed: how a US far-right group is influencing anti-gay policies in Africa

US anti-pornography campaigning group has advised, promoted and endorsed anti-LGBTQ+ activists and politicians in Uganda

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A long-standing US anti-pornography campaigning group has advised, promoted and endorsed anti-LGBTQ+ activists and politicians in Uganda, including a governing party member who endorsed anti-LGBTQ+ laws by saying gays "should be castrated", and a virulently homophobic founder of a "militaristic" Christian boys camp.

The revelations about Washington DC-based National Center on Sexual Exploitation (NCOSE) and its spin-offs and affiliates - based on documents, audio and video recordings and open-source materials - raise questions about its recent disavowals of its history of anti-LGBTQ+ positions, and its role in Uganda's passage last year of laws on homosexuality which are among the most punitive and restrictive in the world.

It also complicates NCOSE's efforts to play down its religious associations and its history on the Christian right in order to exercise a more authoritative influence on policymakers in the US and around the world.

The Guardian contacted NCOSE for comment. A spokesperson responded with a link to a December 2023 statement in which the organization admitted to "moments in our organization's history prior to our leadership change in 2011, when remarks were made that were indeed anti-LGBTQ+" but spoke of a "commitment to serve, uplift, and respect all persons, including members of the LGBTQ+ community".

NCOSE's affiliations on show in South Africa

NCOSE's efforts to make inroads in Uganda have been continuing for at least a decade, according to materials on the organization's own website. An October 2015 blog post reports on NCOSE-sponsored White Ribbon Against Pornography (Wrap) week activities in the country, and says that this is the second annual WRAP campaign.

A spin-off organisation, the International Coalition on Sexual Exploitation (ICSE), was created to "share, deploy, and leverage the work of the US-based NCOSE", according to NCOSE's 2022 annual report, and had been "advising government leaders" in Uganda and elsewhere.

By the time of its 2022 Coalition to End Sexual Exploitation (Cese) Africa Summit in Pretoria, South Africa, NCOSE had done enough to attract prominent anti-LGBTQ+ voices from Uganda and other African nations, as well as other US organizations promoting an anti-LGBTQ+ agenda in Africa.

A NCOSE blog post in the wake of the conference reported that after opening remarks by NCOSE CEO Dawn Hawkins, attendees heard a "moving call to action" from the Ugandan government minister Sarah Achieng Opendi.

Last year Opendi, a minister in the government of the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) party, said gays "should be castrated" so they couldn't "continue with homosexuality" in prison. The comments came in the course of a parliamentary debate on the passage of the harshest anti-LGBTQ+ in the world.

Opendi was subsequently denied a visa to travel to the US, and was one of hundreds of Ugandan politicians who had visa restrictions imposed by the US over the laws, which prescribe the death penalty or life imprisonment for many same-sex acts and 20 years imprisonment for "promoting" homosexuality, which many opponents claim criminalizes LGBTQ+ advocacy.

Another speaker at that conference was Sharon Slater, the president of Family Watch International (FWI), which the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) designates as a hate group.

According to the SPLC, Slater's anti-LGBTQ+ activism has been focused on Africa, and on countering UN efforts to promote equal rights. Along the way she has "forged close ties over the years with virulently anti-gay African activists".

At another conference in Lagos, Nigeria, in 2012, Slater reportedly told delegates that LGBTQ+ rights were "fictitious".

A CNN investigation last year explored Slater's promotion of "'family values' conferences across the African continent", asking about the relationship between those events and the subsequent passage of anti-gay laws.

Although FWI denied any direct involvement in drafting the law, an anonymous source told CNN that FWI had provided assistance to members of parliament who were promoting the legislation, even influencing its language.

Partners in hate

NCOSE's other ties in Uganda include The Boys' Mentorship Programme (BMP), run by Godfrey Kuteesa, which it lists as a "Partner Organization" on its website. NCOSE has worked with Kuteesa for nearly a decade, and featured him in the 2015 blog post discussing Wrap week.

BMP's activities include an annual "Summer Boys' Boot Camp", which the organization's own website describes as "militaristic in nature".

Last July, Kuteesa posted a video to X (formerly Twitter) that showed him making boys at the boot camp shout "a man marries a woman" four times, before shouting at them "That is the natural way!"

In other posts on X, Kuteesa has written that "gay is not a sexual orientation," that boys with "pins in their ears ... always turn out to be homos", and that "African Leaders worry that Obama's charisma will lead young people into homosexual sin."

Kuteesa was a signatory to an ICSE open letter calling on credit card companies to "stop processing payments for the hardcore pornography industry", and later that year spoke at a NCOSE panel on the "harms of pornography in Africa".

In 2021 he gave a workshop at NCOSE's flagship event, the Cese Global Summit, on "How to Help Boys Struggling with Pornography".

Exodus Cry

Although the Cese Africa summit appears to have been a one-off event, the CESE Global Summit has been held annually since 2014, with this year's event scheduled for 5-8 August in Washington DC.

This year's event features a range of comparatively mainstream speakers alongside two members of another Christian right organization that NCOSE has previously collaborated with: Benjamin Nolot and Helen Taylor from Exodus Cry.

Founded in 2008 by Nolot, Exodus Cry originated as a weekly prayer group at the International House of Prayer in Kansas City (IHOPKC). That church is now mired in scandal over accusations of sexual and spiritual abuse against its founder, Mike Bickle, who once said that homosexuality "opens the door to the demonic realm".

In 2013, IHOPKC featured in a critical documentary broadcast on PBS, God Loves Uganda, which accused it and other evangelical organizations of inflaming homophobia in the country.

According to a wedding announcement in the Wrightsville Beach Magazine, Nolot and his wife were working at IHOPKC at the time of their marriage, and one of the celebrants were senior IHOPKC leader, Pastor Lou Engle. Engle is himself a former employee of IHOPKC who traveled to Uganda in 2010 and praised the "courage" and "righteousness" of politicians who were attempting to pass an earlier version of the anti-LGBTQ+ laws.

Nolot denied any association with IHOPKC to the Daily Beast in 2020, which reported that Exodus Cry was at that time trying to "distance itself from religion" in the midst of a prominent campaign, Traffickinghub, which which it was promoting. That campaign accused the adult site Pornhub of hosting content featuring victims of sex trafficking and child sexual abuse.

The campaign, which culminated in an online petition with millions of signatures demanding that Pornhub be shut down and its executives prosecuted, and favorable coverage from New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof, started with a 2020 op-ed in The Washington Examiner by Laila Mickelwait.

The Daily Beast reported that at that time Mickelwait was working for Exodus Cry. According to an online biography, between 2011 and 2014, Mickelwait worked as an "intercessory missionary" for IHOPKC, although she has told the Guardian she never held such a role.

Along with Exodus Cry, NCOSE is a co-sponsor of Traffickinghub, and has featured Mickelwait as a speaker at several events.

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In a 2020 impact statement, NCOSE praised the Traffickinghub campaign and boasted "Thanks to NCOSE advocacy, online payment processor PayPal and popular brand Kraft Heinz both cut ties with Pornhub."

NCOSE

NCOSE was originally founded as Operation Yorkville in 1962 by three New York City clergymen who included Catholic priest Father Morton A Hill. It was renamed as Morality In Media (MIM) in 1968, and was fronted by Hill until his death in 1985.

Hill's work with the organization made him a high-profile morality crusader, and he was appointed by the Nixon administration to serve on the President's Commission on Obscenity and Pornography. MIM launched protest campaigns against sex shops and sex toys, and erotically charged pop cultural phenomena like the 1978 film Caligula, Madonna's 1992 book Sex and Monty Python's 1979 film Life of Brian.

Increasingly, however, MIM involved itself in anti-LGBTQ+ campaigns. In the 1990s MIM encouraged a boycott of Disney after the company began to provide spousal benefits to the partners of LGBTQ+ employees. In January 2004, MIM was one of 15 groups that founded the Coalition for Marriage, which campaigned against Massachusetts's looming legalization of same-sex marriage, which happened that May in response to a 2003 state supreme court decision which ruled that its prohibition was unconstitutional.

MIM rebranded as NCOSE in 2010 under then-president Patrick Trueman, who still serves on the organization's board.

Trueman came to NCOSE after stints in organizations including SPLC-designated hate groups the American Family Association and the Alliance Defending Freedom. He has a history of anti-gay remarks: as late as 2009 he objected to David Ogden, Barack Obama's pick for deputy attorney general, on the grounds that he had supported "the rights of homosexuals".

Others around NCOSE have associations with extreme elements of the Christian right: general counsel Benjamin Bull was director of the Alliance Defending Freedom before joining NCOSE in 2019, and Hadley Arkes, listed as a NCOSE board member on the organization's most recent available 990 filing, is a proponent of the discredited pseudoscience of gay conversion therapy.

This article was amended on 8 August 2024 to reflect Laila Mickelwait's response that she was never an intercessory missionary for IHOPKC. It has also been clarified that Traffickinghub was (and is) a campaign promoted by Exodus Cry; its origin, as the article had made clear, was in an op-ed written by Mickelwait, who became the campaign's founder.

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